

Advancing the Process of Entry by Troops through Home Visits

Home visits have proven to be an effective approach in promoting both expansion and consolidation in different settings and at different levels of cluster development. Initially the concept of home visits was suggested by the Universal House of Justice as a means of establishing the institute process in those clusters in which large-scale growth had occurred in earlier years. In these areas there were lists of believers who, over the passage of time, had ceased to be involved in Bahá'í activity. Home visits became a way to reestablish contact with potentially responsive friends, "engage in meaningful conversation," and gradually introduce the idea of institute courses. Even in cases where the old believers could not be contacted, opportunities were created to teach the Faith to their family members, friends, or neighbors. The approach of home visits has also been successful in clusters which did not have a similar history of mass teaching. Here, visits to believers who had not participated in Bahá'í activities for some time resulted in rekindling their faith and attracting them to study circles.

Conducting home visits in order to promote expansion and consolidation soon became associated with Book 2 of the Ruhi Institute. This course prepares students to present deepening themes, calling upon them to practice this skill by making presentations to other Bahá'ís. Campaigns of home visits have drawn upon those completing this course, encouraging them to undertake deepening and teaching activities, and to invite contacts to participate in the three core activities. For example, in a four-day campaign in Daidanaw village in Myanmar, the visiting teachers were initially very awkward, acting "as if they were a recording machine" with "no eye contact, no pause, almost not breathing." There was little interaction with the listener and they had a tendency to lecture. With practice and experience, the teachers became more at ease, more capable and confident, achieving a good rapport with the 88 people contacted. Their efforts resulted in new participants in the core activities and three new declarations. In Turkey, the Hatay 1 cluster, Book 4 participants who made home visits were able to draw on their training to share stories from the life of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. While in the city of Istanbul, five new study circles were established after a brief but effective campaign. In the Kharagpur cluster in India, the Local Spiritual Assembly of Satrapur established a team to undertake home visits during the Fast. They visited 32 families in four villages, inviting them to a unity feast, which attracted 70 Bahá'ís and 26 others, most of whom made commitments to participate in future core activities.

Campaigns for home visits can be adapted to the developmental level of a cluster, whether to help establish the institute process, multiply core activities, or support programs of intensive growth. The few case studies included below illustrate different factors that contribute to the effectiveness of home visits in a wide range of circumstances. In every situation, preparation was invaluable, while reflection after the experience was critical to learn how to improve performance. In all instances, courage and wisdom seemed to be necessary ingredients for success.

The Importance of Practice When Studying Book 2: The United Kingdom

A tutor from the United Kingdom eloquently set forth the benefits of practicing the presentation of deepening themes through home visits, learned as part of studying Book 2.

When we started out on our journey through the courses [using] the Ruhi Institute [materials], most of us knew very little about the practical aspects of the courses. In fact, many felt that perhaps, being European and maybe somehow different from human beings on other parts of the planet, these elements of the courses were “not for us.” Perhaps they were “culturally inappropriate” or just “not our cup of tea.”

How wrong we were! Through experience we have learned that the practical elements are a vital part of the training institute courses. If the practice has not been done, the courses cannot be considered to be complete....

We are learning about teaching the Faith and about fostering community life through these simple practices. When we visit our contacts or new believers and engage in conversation about spiritual matters, we form a closer bond of friendship. We are able to share the Word of God in an environment where our hosts are, quite literally, at home. They can ask the questions they might feel unable to ask in other circumstances. Their family is able to join in and often does...

...It is surely a wonderful thing for family members to learn about the Faith together. If, by the grace of God, the members of a family become believers, they can strengthen and support one another.

Carrying out a home visit for the first time is not always easy. Sometimes the participants in the institute course lack confidence to meet with new believers or seekers. Tutors need to find creative ways to help the study circle participants step into the field of action. One tutor wrote:

In one rather small Book 2 circle, the group were all new believers and a little nervous about making visits. After encouraging them for a while, I realized I needed to help a little more, so I suggested that for the first visit, I could invite some people to my home and they could share one of their themes in a group setting where they would have more support.

This developed into something really beautiful, because what emerged was a short, scripted dramatization about the life of Bahá'u'lláh. The scene was set in a beautiful way and gave our house a magical atmosphere recalling the days of Bahá'u'lláh in Baghdad. The story of Bahá'u'lláh was shared with a group of Bahá'ís and seekers.

Taking the opportunity that same evening, we arranged for the home visits, to share the theme of the “Covenant” with some of these friends in their homes the following week.

A tutor from London observed:

In my experience, Book 2 really does teach us how easy it is to make presentations and to deepen others (and ourselves, in the process) in the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. We no longer need to leave it to the eloquent members of our community. We are invited to acquire eloquence for ourselves: and all we need utter is an incy-wincy “dewdrop” in order to experience how enriching it truly is. But the secret lies in sharing the material with others. If you don't, you will be inclined to find Book 2 irrelevant and tedious. “O Wayfarer in the Path of God! Take thou thy portion of the ocean of His grace and deprive not thyself of the things that lie hidden in its depths. Be thou of them that have partaken of its treasures.” You have to share your portion to *receive* the treasure!

A long-time believer noted how home visits could play an important role in the deepening of the new Bahá'ís:

We were told that we were to meet a believer who had declared one year ago. We also heard that this believer had a deep knowledge of the Faith. So we went, intending to follow the practice for the sake of learning to present the Faith, without much hope of teaching anything new....I had a wonderful time. The believer knew little about the history of the Faith, but could recite full passages by heart! So in fact, our visit was just what was needed for that believer at that time. This reminded me very much of my beginning as a believer, where I felt there was so much that I just discovered along the way, rather than in a systematic way. It is a great relief for me to find out that we are being trained to deepen new believers in a systematic way!

Then there is the point of view of a non-Bahá'í who received a home visit. The author of this account had been studying the Faith, and had, in fact, even completed Book 1. He was visited by two youth who were participating in Book 2.

They presented me in a tutorial the basic Bahá'í beliefs and history, lots of very interesting detailed cogent articulate explanations. I very much enjoyed this and the company, and benefited from their knowledge...

My abiding memory over the next few days was of the beauty of the souls of the Bahá'ís...my thanks to you all.

This seeker declared his Faith in Bahá'u'lláh one week after the visit.

Learning About Home Visit Campaigns: Mongolia

The friends in Mongolia began undertaking home visits initially as a means of enhancing the skills of the tutors. A one-week review of Books 1 and 2 was held for about twenty people who were actively engaged in tutoring. The following is a report of how they proceeded.

After completing the review of Book 1 the participants divided into 10 teams and visited over 40 families of old and new Bahá'ís as well as some non-Bahá'í families in two districts of Ulaanbaatar, mostly in the neighborhood of the Wade

Institute building. During these visits they engaged in friendly conversation about spiritual matters and offered to say prayers. Then after the prayers, quotations were studied together with the family on the importance of having devotional meetings in one's home. Discussion on the quotations led to some families committing themselves to have regular devotional meetings in their homes. The family members were also invited to join study circles, [and] as a result, several study circles were initiated in the homes of these families as well as a few children's classes. This was an eye-opening experience for everyone, as we saw how it was not difficult to multiply the core activities by visiting homes of believers, both active and less active, if we are able to be welcomed into the house. Whereas before we were trying to get people coming to our homes or the Bahá'í centers, now we saw that it is much more effective to initiate activities in the homes of the people. Our focus before was on individual transformation and we assumed that when a person became an active believer, he will stay active forever and this will change his surrounding people too, but often we found that an active person after some time can become inactive because of various circumstances of life. The approach of visiting homes leads to the transformation of the households....

...From about 80 families which we aimed to visit, less than half of them could be located. To make the first experience positive, the organizers mixed the addresses of both non-contactable old ... [and] new Bahá'ís as well as some active Bahá'ís. We found also that even visiting a so-called active Bahá'í home was beneficial as many of these families did not have regular devotional meetings in their homes and they would not respond so eagerly to the calls raised at Feasts and reflection meetings.

Thus as a result of the two-day campaigns after Book 1 and 2, 42 devotional meetings were held, 8 regular devotional meetings were established, 14 study circles and 6 children's classes [were formed].

After this initial success, however, the friends in this community in Mongolia found it difficult to sustain what had been achieved.

We found ... it is quite easy to initiate a large number of regular devotional meetings, study circles and children's classes in the homes of people. However, [it is] much more difficult to find committed human resources who would be willing and responsible enough to continuously come to the family until the activity becomes regular and sustained. When the youth movement was launched we found that perhaps targeting younger youth who are fresh and open for learning and consistently working with them individually and in groups could be the answer to our challenge of the lack of human resources.

Thus, after this experience, youth were enlisted to carry out home visits. New insights continued to emerge from reflection on action.

Within the institute campaign conducted at the beginning a total of 46 youth participated in the courses on Books 1–3 combined with the two-day campaigns in between to visit homes of non-contactable, old and new believers to conduct devotional meetings, share deepening themes, initiate study circles and children's classes. The experience was very positive although this was the first time the

institute organized a course especially for the youth aged 15–22....In Ulaanbaatar on the first day the youth were broken into 13 pairs, in each of them one youth was from Ulaanbaatar to ensure continuity. The first day they started with Bahá'í families, [mixing] ... some active and some inactive families as well as a few non-Bahá'í families; the experience was very positive. The next day was full of difficulties as they started with new families. One thing we learned was that the arrangement for this visiting should be done well in advance and we had some hiccups in the coordination. Also, we found out that since most of the youth are quite new in service to the Faith, it is very important that initially they go with an experienced teacher and that they should not be left to themselves. Otherwise their first experiences might be negative and if there is no one to support [them], they can become discouraged.

Home visits have now become an integral part of the work of the Faith in Mongolia.

Since January we have had an intensive period of activity with a number of institute and teaching campaigns in Ulaanbaatar and the Murun Cluster in Khovsgol. We are very happy to be able to report that during the campaign in the Murun cluster, forty-five people declared their Faith in Bahá'u'lláh. Thirty-two study circles have finished. Eighteen groups visited eighty-seven families. There are 47 regular devotional meetings and 28 regular children's classes....

As a result of the campaign in the Ulaanbaatar cluster there are now 24 regular devotional meetings in private homes, 15 regular children's classes and 11 groups are visiting inactive Bahá'ís and holding devotional gathering with their families. So far, 34 families have been visited by these groups. There are currently 14 study circles being conducted in Ulaanbaatar, and there are now 4 junior youth classes.

The Importance of Being Systematic When Undertaking Home Visits: Kazakhstan

The Almaty cluster of Kazakhstan was one of the first to use home visits in a systematic manner in order to widen the community of interest—those people who have demonstrated an interest in some aspect of the Faith. During 2003, this audacious cluster adopted the goal of reaching out to 500 individuals within a six-month period. To achieve this, the friends from the cluster made a preliminary goal of reaching 150 individuals through home visits. They hoped to learn from this first home visit campaign and to achieve new opportunities for growth.

The campaign began by preparing the participants. A refresher course focusing upon unit 2 of Book 2 and unit 3 of Book 6 was carried out over two days. The participants used drama to explore how they would interact with those they would be visiting. This not only helped them to consider some of the challenges that they might encounter, but generated enthusiasm for the visits. The participants also decided what literature they should take along for the visits.

Twenty-one believers carried out one or more visits over the next few weeks, contacting 101 individuals, including 47 less active Bahá'ís, 44 people who had expressed interest in the Faith or were new contacts, and 10 pre-youth or children. The participants met weekly during the campaign to reflect, prepare, and consult; these meetings proved vital to the learning process. The visits varied considerably.

- Twenty-two presented a deepening theme similar to the one outlined in Book 2.
- Five individuals were introduced to the Faith in the manner outlined in Book 6.
- Twenty-three individuals received the visitor warmly and participated in devotions but were not given any other information about the Faith.
- Eighteen of the visits did not proceed further than a social visit.
- Fourteen individuals received Bahá'í literature after a brief talk.
- Six individuals were reluctant to receive the visitor, showing no signs of interest.
- Five of the less active believers stated that they did not consider themselves to be Bahá'ís.

The tangible results of the visits included the following:

- Three regular devotional meetings for a total of nine participants
- One class for youth and pre-youth
- Five study circles for Book 1, including seven new contacts and one formerly less than active believer, during the course of which three became Bahá'ís
- Two study circles for Book 2, including 4 formerly less active Bahá'ís
- Seven individuals who began to attend other activities, including the Nineteen Day Feast and Holy Day observances

When reflecting upon the visits, the participants expressed that they had found it much more difficult to actually make the presentations than they had thought when they were studying the books; but the visits reinforced the importance of learning to do so. They also realized the importance of visiting new believers and seekers in their homes to strengthen the bonds of friendship, rather than leaving them to themselves. In addition, it was learned that some believers need a more experienced person to accompany them until they gradually gain confidence before undertaking visits on their own. Participants noted that follow-up visits were often more difficult than the initial visit, often due to practical reasons such as distance, work schedules, and the like. Clearly, large numbers of people could be reached through home visits only when many people in the community were participating in the campaigns.